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The big missile is a big bomb.

MX Hits the Fan

If François Rabelais's mythical giant, Gargantua, had a nuclear counterpart, it would be the MX missile system. Should the MX be approved, it would entail the largest and most expensive construction project ever undertaken. Although the Pentagon and defense contractors claim it to be strategically imperative, economically salubrious, and environmentally sound, a growing number of both hawks and doves challenge all of these assumptions, denouncing the MX as the greatest boondoggle in history. On July 1, a 15-member "blue ribbon" panel of prominent citizens, appointed by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger to study the project, was scheduled to report its recommendations. It is still too early to write the MX postmortem, but there is every indication that Congress will demand that the system be truncated.

The problem with the MX project lies less with the missile itself than with the proposed land-basing mode now under the auspices of the Air Force. Designed to counter the perceived vulnerability of America's current land-based missiles, the plan calls for shuttling some 200 MX missiles among 4,600 underground shelters throughout the Great Basin of Utah and Nevada. The intention is to keep the Soviets guessing about the location of each missile. This sounds plausible in the abstract, but the scale and requirements of this overblown shell game are staggering. According to Air Force figures, over 8,000 miles of heavy-duty road and 660,000 new homes would have to be built. In order to shuttle the 190,000-pound missiles, a fleet of 200-foot, 750-ton transporters would need to be developed. The project would require 1.5 million tons of cement (a surplus quantity the United States currently does not have the capacity to produce), 400,000 tons of steel, and over 100 billion gallons of water. The Air Force says the system would be deployed over 8,500 square miles, an area slightly larger than Massachusetts. But Herbert Scoville Jr., president of the Arms Control Association and former assistant director of the CIA's Scientific Intelligence division, claims the deployment area would encompass a total of about 40,000 square miles. This is equivalent to the combined areas of Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. Under the MX plan, much of this area would be closed to the public.

Early Pentagon estimates projected the cost of the MX system at \$30 billion. In 1980, the General Accounting Office revised the estimate to \$55 billion. The most recent price tag, issued in June 1981 by the Congressional Budget Office, estimates the whole system could cost up to \$70 billion. After adjusting for minimal inflation and low cost overrun, the price could easily exceed \$100 billion. Oklahoma senator Henry Bellmon, ranking Republican on the Senate Budget Committee, predicts a price of \$120 billion, and the Pentagon now concedes the price may fall into the \$100 billion range after all.

ALTHOUGH members of Congress increasingly are coming to view the MX as an unfeasible plan, and a plethora of military analysts are still contesting its strategic value, enthusiasm for the project could not be greater among defense contractors. Their eagerness is understandable. The MX hasn't yet been officially approved, but the federal government already has invested more than two billion dollars in defense contracts and currently spends four million dollars a day to develop the system. More than 10,000 workers are now employed, and nearly 1,000 companies are involved. Should the project gain approval, multi-million-dollar contracts would follow. So lucrative is the project that, in an effort to sell the MX, the major contracting companies—Martin Marietta, Rockwell International, Boeing, and others—have hired high-powered public relations firms throughout the country to clear up "misconceptions" about the system. Smith & Harroff Company in Washington, DC, has set up an "MX Information Bureau" to disseminate pro-MX material to the press and public. Slick color brochures and pamphlets stress the number of jobs the system would create and the Air Force's commitment to make the world safe again and to protect the environment. Contractors also have hired Cambridge Reports to conduct nationwide polls about the MX. The firm claims to have discovered "striking" evidence of public support for the defense system, and its report was recently sent to the White House. However, as Michael Kinsley has pointed out ("The Art of Polling," TNR, June 20), there is good reason to be skeptical about the reliability of Cambridge Reports's methods and results.

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